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Learner agency in FFL pronunciation by analysing pragmatic strategies

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I. INTRODUCTION

The landscape of Applied Phonetics is as diverse and contextualized as Applied Linguistics [1]. In French-speaking scientific areas, Applied Phonetics had to face the emergence of “*Didactique des langues*” which aimed to create an autonomous discipline led by researchers in French as a foreign language (FFL). This resulted in an epistemological gap between objective and experimental research (Applied Linguistics/Phonetics) on the one side and subjective and action-based research (“*Didactique du FLE/de la prononciation*”) on the other side. In the process, the rise of communication-oriented approaches underestimated the role of pronunciation in language development as long as successful communication was reached. As a result, curricula either ignored pronunciation or relied on behaviourist drills [2]. In order to counter this, researchers suggested different solutions. In English as a foreign language (EFL), “[the focus of] pronunciation pedagogy should be intelligibility and functional communicability rather than nativeness” [3]. In FFL, some researchers developed sociolinguistic norms based on empirical data [4] while others tried to rethink a purely “corrective” approach to pronunciation training by suggesting a “mediation” framework more in line with contemporary research in Applied Linguistics and the Human Sciences [5]. This approach considers that language-learning systems are more relevant if they enable the learners to develop their own agency based on an individual definition of their objectives in terms of norms and translanguaging identity. We define agency as the process that one triggers to make actions that are not driven by automaticity [6]. The (pronunciation) teacher becomes a mediator (vs. a model) by developing their awareness of the fact that each learner has different needs, goals and trajectories. This assumption implies that pronunciation teachers may accept two ways within a group of learners aiming at either: 1) nativeness (which remains to be phonetically determined), using well-documented tools (imitation, drills, shadowing) or 2) agency (developing a different self in foreign language - intelligibility, empowerment) - for which tools are less documented. Focusing on the second aim, this study explores the way the teaching and the learning of a foreign language could trigger learner agency by analysing pragmatic strategies. Such strategies could help to promote translanguaging [7] in everyday life communication. This comprehensive and exploratory research aims to analyse short descriptions of past life experiences to determine strategies for developing agentivity in situations where pronunciation is thematised. The identification of these strategies will allow building an action-based research.

II. THE STUDY

This explanatory study relies on a survey sent to speakers of French who have learned it as an additional language [8] [9]. After collecting metadata on the subjects’ sociolinguistic profile, two open answer questions aim to determine situations where agency could have emerged from problem situations: 1) “Tell us a positive or negative story about your French accent” ; and “Do you think that something you said or did may have helped you to cope better with this situation (say something, make a joke, think of something, etc.)? Can you describe it?”. Eighty-eight respondents’ answers are analysed using discourse and thematic analyses. On average, survey respondents are advanced learners of French (C1-C2), have learnt French as their 1st to 3rd foreign language for a long period of time (more than 16 years) and in later life (11 years-old or more). The respondents express a rather high self-confidence regarding their oral skills. Different strategies emerge from the data regarding a possible agentive process: humour, caricature, contextualisation, etc. Tab. 1 gives a few examples of the mentioned strategies.

TABLE I. EXAMPLES OF ANSWERS AND THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Answers in French	Themes
[FR] Je fais référence à Jane Birkin et leur dit qu’il ne faut pas remuer LA couteau dans LE plaie... [ENG] I refer to Jane Birking and I tell them not to rub THE salt in wound.	[humour] + [caricature] + [culture]
[FR] En disant que je suis pas née en France, que j’ai appris tardivement. [ENG] By saying that I was not born in France, that I learned it late.	[contextualisation] + [re-humanisation]
[FR] Je pense que les gens soient habitués à écouter des accents différentes ces jours [ENG] I think that nowadays people should be used to different	[distanciation]

Answers in French	Themes
<i>accents.</i>	

III. CONCLUSION

This exploratory and descriptive study broadens the horizon of the teaching and the learning of pronunciation to the development of pragmatic strategies. It highlights the fact that comprehensibility and intelligibility are largely context-dependent [10]. It is therefore necessary to get learners to develop pragmatic strategies and, above all, to identify those that they already use. It leads to concrete (pedagogical) examples of how teachers could help learners to be agents of the way they construct their identity in an additional language. This could take the form of training tasks in order to raise the learner awareness of the available metacognitive and pragmatic strategies. Simulation-based approaches can support this awareness by rehearsing the use of these strategies in a more controlled context. However, in the end, a social task is necessary [11]. Learners are no longer gripped by the necessity to achieve a normative pronunciation because of the lack of opportunities to exist with their accent and not against it – against forms of glottophobia [12]. However, it will be necessary in the future to lead action-based research integrating these tools in order to measure the way learners take control of them.

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